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ABSTRACT

One means of understanding literature or historical events is to construct events, or go beyond the text or event. This technique enables students to use their own bodies and voices to understand the dynamics of a situation and add additional material that may not have existed at the time the event occurred. Such a practice provides opportunities for children to develop problem-solving skills and critical thinking skills, and to engage in active learning. This project involved a group of pre-service teachers working with fifth grade children. All students participated in dramatic improvisation as a means of experiencing the event being examined. The concluding activities for the exercise involved reflection through discourse and written language experiences. (NL)

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CLASSROOM DRAMA: DISCOURSE AS A MODE OF INQUIRY

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CLASSROOM DRAMA: DISCOURSE AS A MODE OF INQUIRY

Providing opportunities for children to practice problem solving and critical thinking is increasingly of concern to educators. In particular, two curricular areas, language arts and social studies, have long been seen as ideally but by no means exclusively suited to enhancement by the introduction of problem solving and critical thinking activities through mutual discourse between teachers and students. Several techniques are typically used for these purposes: (1) comparing contradictory accounts of the same event or differing critical statements about the same piece of literaure or current event; (2) class discussions, either teacher- or student-directed, formal or informal; and (3) role-playing, in which students attempt to express an alternative attitude or point of view from "inside" by adopting that point of view temporarily as their own.

Drama allows children to put themselves into other people's shoes. By using personal experience, the child is helped to understand others' points of view and, in the process, may discover more than s/he knew when s/he started (Johnson & O'Neill, 1984, p. 44). One means of coming to understand a piece of literature or an historical event is to construct events that may not have occurred, or to go beyond that text or event. The purpose of the going beyond is to enable students to use their own language, their own voices and bodies to resolve conflicts or understand the dynamics of a situation by elaborating upon it. They add material that may or may not have existed in time. Their

experiencing through elaboration leads them back to richer knowledge about the text or event being investigated.

Dramatic improvisation followed by reflection gives students practice in reasoning, in accepting ambiguity, in acknowledging the validity of divergent perspectives, and in living through the process of arriving at valid conclusions and points of closure. Furthermore, students may be helped to reach an understanding of how societies and individuals negotiate consensus, resolve conflicts, make moral and ethical judgements, and, conversely, how and why they fail to do these things successfully.

While the technique of dramatic improvisation followed by reflection is the focus of this discussion, much of what is stated here is applicable to more formal methods of inquiry, as well. Drama may, in fact, integrate or subsume the techniques of critical comparisons and discussions, the drawing of inferences and formulation of hypotheses as modes of inquiry unto themselves, which makes the process very attractive to children by incorporating naturally children's play activities and their inherent emotional content.

In our work as child drama specialist and teacher educator, we encourage teachers to bridge the gaps between the curriculum content by fostering active learning in the classroom. We plan not with the epic aspect of the curriculum, but rather with small segments of that curriculum well-suited to engendering thinking and feeling--often these are pivotal events which appear to cause major changes in the direction society has taken. The topics

developed here are intended merely as examples suggesting various approaches that may be adopted, in order that teachers may proceed to invent and develop topics of their own choosing, as specifically suggested by their individual curricular guides.

Forging a problem from a curricular topic. A drama topic differs in its structure and lesson plan from other teaching plans in two important ways. In dramatic role-playing, it is necessary first to present that topic as a problem which has no single correct or given resolution. Thus, while we could, in the model experience described later in this article, have simulated in historically accurate detail the climactic moment in the sequence of events in the founding of the Iroquois confederacy ending in the burying of the implements of war and acceptance of the articles of confederation of the Iroquois nation, we instead chose to explore the various significant kinds of problems these tribes might conceivably have experienced in their encounters with one another--hunting, growing crops, traveling from place to place--which might have been the source of conflict among the Iroquois tribes. What kinds of events and forms of conflict might these tribes have experienced that could have led them to seek peaceful means of solving problems? Problems posed in these terms have no given point of closure.

Creating a context. It is also extremely important in selecting a topic and developing a problem for dramatic enactment to create a context for the drama. The problem to be solved must be concrete and specific. This kind of background--informational,

experiential, and intuitive--is elicited through research and questioning. The discourse, elicited by asking questions, serves to expand on a child's prior and experience and, concurrently, suggests novel ways of using that knowledge, ways not previously explored by the child through acts of analogy and completion. The decision-making process simultaneously creates a context for the drama and invites the thinking process. The child is always presented with alternatives and encouraged to reach personal conclusions and group consensus.

Model Experiences and Strategies. In the project described in this narrative, the authors, together with a group of pre-service teachers, modelled a way of working in classrooms with fifth grade children that we feel can be replicated with any combination of children and adults, given the premise that all adults--whether teacher, teacher-aide, or student intern--in any classroom--grade school, high school, or college--accept the constraints of interacting with the students as equal members or partners of the group or society being simulated. Everyone participates "in-role." Obviously, some of the roles carry more authority than do others. This structure allows the drama specialist or in-service specialist to be the instrument of directing the course of the drama. The teacher is thereby provided an opportunity to learn a less familiar methodology as well as to observe his/her students working with other adults. The teacher is likewise free to follow up the drama by elaborating further in the context of his/her own educational

agenda. Frequently, teachers, having participated in dramatic improvisations, begin to design and implement these techniques in order to enrich curriculum units.

In our work together, we attempt to identify model experiences which employ a practical interactive approach to critical thinking, using drama that would be germane to curricula for the upper elementary grades. Our method of engaging the children in improvisation and reflection through discourse on the topic selected is supported and extended by written language activities. Within this rather broad general goal, our more specific objectives include the development of topical discussions--not as questions of fact but as cross-cultural conflicts or conflicts of values as they appeared during various periods in our cultural and literary history.

A second objective is the development of detailed strategies for motivating and evoking critical thinking for use by teachers. A planning model for developing the strategies used for each topic was derived from the work of Dorothy Heathcote (Wagner, 1976).

Our classroom work, in both teacher training and directly with children, explored a variety of model experiences using our threefold approach: improvisation, reflection through discourse, and written language experiences. These include the situation extant in the towns of New England when some colonists believed that the correct course of action was to remain law-abiding and loyal to the crown, whereas others maintained that they should

protest what they believed to be an unjust and unfair system of governance. A second topic focussed on the circumstances, particularly those in the border states, existing when the fugitive slave law was passed, making it a crime to assist runaway slaves attempting to make their way to freedom in Canada, which many believed was a moral obligation of a higher order than the civil law. The third and final topic was an investigation of what might have led the warring tribes of what was to become the Iroquois nation to seek through consensus a way to live with one another in what came to be known as "The Great Peace." The examples discussed later in the present article stem from the last of these three model experiences.

The formation of the Iroquois nation has strong topical appeal for several reasons. First, this experiment in democratic self-government antedates by several centuries that based on the Constitution of the United States. Second, there exists a rich body of literature, both legend and myth, surrounding these historical events. Finally, this topic presents a view of Native American cultural and political life that contradicts the popular stereotypes.

The choice of a topic for enquiry through drama always assumes not only the existence of a body of primary source material, of both a literary and an historical nature, but the accessability of such resources to teachers. The source materials used for the model experiences consisted primarily of such print media as old newspaper articles, historical documents, diaries,

letters, and short stories, but also included objects and artifacts symbolic of cultural values as well as rituals authentic to the topical context. The body of concrete materials that support the topic are considered just as important as the plans for conducting the improvisations themselves. By no means are the improvisations aimed at the strict historical authenticity or the literal recreation of events. Critical thinking, higher-level thinking, and problem-solving behaviors are elicited by creating imaginatively characters not necessarily existing within the context of the historical event, living history, or myth, but who are nevertheless compelled to make choices of group or individual significance.

The topic was conceptualized in three segments, one for each of the three sessions we conducted with our students. In choosing the scenario for our first session, the seasonal activity of planting corn, relying on the students' familiarity with planting, we attempted to make the transition from children in the twentieth century to the role of sixteenth century Native American children. We "planted" a field of corn, a task both specific and concrete in nature. Just as planting was nearing completion, the drama leader entered the scene in the role of a member of another tribe, challenging the right to plant on land allegedly belonging to the other, competing tribe.

Our implicit working assumption was that given the opportunity, students participating in the second session would opt for an action-packed scenario resulting in violent

confrontation between the Mohawk and Onondaga Iroquois tribes. What they did not anticipate was that we would challenge them to work through the aftermath of battle: burying their dead, caring for their wounded, grieving their losses, comforting mourning relatives and friends, and conceiving how those slain could never be replaced. The process of working through this aftermath of violence was accomplished by leaders and children acting in-role throughout the continuing improvisation. This, then, was our plan for the second session.

In the third session, we reverted to rituals derived from historical documents (Wallace, 1986, pp. 23-25). Being as true as possible to the spirit of documents which describe the rites of consolation, we created our own rituals. This point of final closure in the third session was entirely preplanned by the leader. The leader told the legend in which, as part of the rite of consolation, Hiawatha strung on three strings of jointed rush as a mark of his grief.

According to the old story, Daganawideh believed it was his task to convince his people to seek peaceful means of resolving their differences. Thus, in our drama, a representative of one warring tribe was sent to confer with the other tribe to get an agreement to use nonviolent means of resolving conflict in the future. In a ceremonial mode, a shell was offered by the leader to each student as a symbol of the resultant accord. The effect was to elevate the level of language within a context of awe and respect.

A fourth technique employed in our drama involves what we have termed reflection through discourse. Problems still remained in the minds of the children regarding how conflict would be resolved, although there was an accord based on the underlying principle that bloodshed and force could no longer be used as the means of resolving conflict. Thus, despite their remaining unanswered questions (or perhaps because of them, the lack of complete closure stimulating yet additional cognitive activity on their part), the students were satisfied.

Model experiences and in-service and pre-service professional training. Our work itself stems from our belief that the education of teachers in the clinical setting of the college classroom must be translated in some practically effective way to work directly with children. In the classroom, we function as tutors in the traditional British sense: as adjuncts to the classroom teacher. Pre-service teachers are trained to interact with the children as members of the group, the operational philosophy being that their students are considered to be equal partners in such classroom interactions. In the college classroom, they also participate in inventing and developing plans for the drama sessions, practice their observational skills, and process the experience, ultimately evaluating both the experience and its results. The drama is staged in the elementary classroom, with the cooperating teacher functioning as a member of the group or society being simulated. This allows the adjunct to be the instrument for controlling or directing the

progress of the drama, and provides cooperating teachers opportunities to learn a less familiar methodology and, in addition, to observe their students working with other adults. The teachers are, subsequently, free to use this mode of inquiry on an independent basis.

Pre-service teachers learn the discourse and reinforcement skills by observing the leader/adjunct working in the naturalistic setting of the classroom, by practicing in the elementary classrooms themselves, and by critiquing and reflecting on the resultant work with their college classmates.

Discourse techniques. The initial step, critical to this work, is to present the topic in a manner that engages the students' interest. Typically, the approach appeals to feelings: the children are stirred emotionally, and are thereby motivated either to read or research; i.e., to seek out factual support of knowledge regarding a piece of literature or an historical event, and establish the level of detail necessary to subsequent dramatic involvement (Wagner, 1977).

Secondly, students are encouraged to draw upon their own world and their personal knowledge of it: "What do people living in the country do, now that Spring is here?" (Plant gardens.); "And how do they get ready to plant their gardens?" (They rototill the land. They dig up the ground.) When the students supply the information derived from their worlds of experience, they are the experts. What the children contribute is, at this stage, accepted as valid, and is respected without value

judgements or editorial comments being made by the teacher. The children are then led to hypothesize how Native Americans might have performed some of these activities. Through this involvement, they receive a glimpse of what that time or place would have been like (Wagner, 1976, p. 187). When they hypothesize how Native Americans might have accomplished what they themselves know how to do in the modern world, the information they provide may not reflect historical fact.

Analogizing, the third important discourse technique likewise sacrifices accuracy of historical detail for emotional depth (Wagner, 1976, p. 187). Analogizing is constantly encouraged and reinforced. Students were encouraged to think about problems the Iroquois might have experienced in securing food, providing housing or shelter, and interacting with one another as well as with members of other tribes. Their imaginings were reinforced by the leader's summarizing comment: "And so it seems they probably had the same kinds of problems we have today getting along with each other."

A fourth technique in discourse is particularly relevant to the phase of each session we call "reflection." Students and the leader are encouraged to describe what the drama was like for them. Thus, after the mourning for the woman who taught the group to plant corn, one child reflected, "The killing seemed like a fun idea [at the time], but I didn't realize it would be like this." Children and teachers alike are actively discouraged from making blaming or evaluative statements. Thus, a statement such

as, "The chief could have taken his role more seriously." could be more appropriately phrased as an owning statement, "When I saw the chief laughing, it was hard for me to believe I was a brave." Also, in reflection, the leader, through repeating the students' statements and through summarizing and wondering aloud, uses rich language, elevating the students' experiences and giving them greater significance.

This group discourse is supplemented by individual discourse in which, through writing, the students recreate the actual experience of the drama with acts of imaginative completion, and, as a result, make their experiences more personally significant and meaningful. Students were asked to write eyewitness accounts of the events which had taken place. The following excerpts are examples of student writing subsequent to a first drama session.

> We stood in a circle, praying to the gods. The teacher made us think about our made-up tool. Then we grouped ourselves and gaved [sic] ourselves a job, mine was to get rid of the tree stumps. I got rid of two tree stumps before one of the teachers playing another Indian said where is your chief. ___ playing our chief said, "what do you want." She said that the grate White Sperit [sic] gave them the land that we were planting on. She said that we had not herd [sic] the last of this.

The event reported in this student's writing refers to the dramatic tension introduced by the drama leader into this scene of imagined Spring planting in order to pose a problem for the students to resolve, a problem having no preconceived or preplanned resolution. The writing of the students not only poses solutions, but in some cases weighs the possible outcomes.

My name is Little Big Horn. Some people from my tribe went to plant corn. As we were planting the Onondaga tribe ran us off our planting field. We've planted there for years.

We don't know what to do yet. I think we should fight for what is rightfully ours.

Today while the men were hunting, fishing and building canoes. The women and children were planting corn. We got a new bowl keeper. After we planted the corn for our tribe (the Mohawks) a person from the Onondaga tribe and said the land we planted was theirs. I think our cheif [sic] should talk it over and come to an agreement and make a compromise.

I'm Little Cheif [sic] my tribe is the Mohawks and today we blessed our corn and plant [sic] it and covered it. When we got done, a person in another trib [sic] named Onandage [sic] came and yelled at us for planting corn on their land. We don't know what to do.

Today we planted corn I got to put the dirt over the corn seeds and the other two got to dig holes and put the seeds in. But a tribe member from the Onandage [sic] ... said that we were taking their land and its [sic] realy [sic] ours and I have wrote [sic] down 3 suggestions for it. (10 We should talk with them (2) Give them some of our goods for the land (3) Fight them for the land.

In our Iroquois drama incident, it came as a shock to some of the students that their decision to create a battle resulted in the killing of one of their own tribal leaders (the woman who had taught them how to plant corn).

The children, encouraged by the leaders, lifted the slain woman (adult, in role) and carried her to a safe place to the side of the classroom. From this safe place, and in response to cues from the leader, a discourse of ritual mourning was created that captured the immediacy of the children's struggle for meaning. The leader, by encouraging the discourse and responding through gesture and word to the emotional reactions exhibited by

the children, created the context through which the children understood the meaning of the battle.

Conclusion. Betty Jane Wagner (1988) has called for detailed observations of drama in the classroom to supplement quantitative studies of speech acts and literary events. Child drama specialists and teachers, through active learning with children in classrooms, create drama experiences which encourage discourse as a mode of inquiry. Drama collaborations in the classroom provide opportunities for these close observations to be made by teachers and pre-service teachers alike. The importance of the roles we, as teachers, play in creating the context in which critical thinking and problem solving occur is made apparent in classroom drama events. By using the children's own experiences as points of departure, and providing a context through which attitudes can be expressed, students are led to discover alternative points of view.

A core concept of drama in education is the creation of personal meaning and the evolution of the sense of universal, ethical concepts through concrete experience. In the process of collaborating with children and using drama episodes in the classroom, discourse operates as a mode of inquiry, elaboration, and reflection. Drama collaborations provide opportunities for adults to observe closely the children's reconstructions and elaborations, thus making more obvious their thinking processes, their reasoning powers, and their adaptability in social interactions.

The significance of the roles teachers play by using the children's own experiences as points of departure provide a context in which attitudes can be expressed, and critical thinking and problem solving can occur. In the process of collaborating with children and using drama episodes in the classroom, discourse, reflection, and collaboration emerge as modes of inquiry.

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